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Britain's Stiff-Upper-Lip Scandal

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LONDON—As our own daily drama unreels in the caucus room of the Senate Office Building, we should not forget that our cousin democracy Britain is struggling with a scandal of its own. Both scandals, theirs and ours, arise from excessive reliance by democratic governments on that most overrated and uncontrollable of all agencies of the state, the secret services.

Our scandal deals with the question of whether President Reagan authorized or permitted illegal acts by members of his administration and especially of his own White House staff. The British scandal deals with allegations by Peter Wright, a former officer of MI5, the British counter-intelligence agency, that between 1974 and 1976 an MI5 group conspired treacherously to undermine and overthrow the elected British government headed by Harold Wilson, now Lord Wilson of Rievaulx. This would seem an even worse scandal than ours since, if it took place, it involved an attack not just on the laws but on democracy itself.

Our scandal has led thus far to three official inquiries (the Tower Commission, appointed by the executive branch; the Iran-contra hearings by the legislative branch, and a special prosecutor designated by the judicial branch), not to mention a fervent variety of unofficial inquiries mounted by an unhampered press. The president has promised full cooperation with the official investigations.

Allegations Reprinted

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher has thus far done her best to hush the British scandal up. She is trying to prevent the publication of "Spycatcher," the memoir in which Peter Wright makes his charges. Several London newspapers, especially that excellent new daily the Independent, have reprinted the allegations; instead of being thanked by a grateful country for exposing a possible threat to British democracy, five newspapers are facing legal proceedings instituted by the attorney general (and members of the House of Commons are forbidden by the speaker even to discuss these proceedings).

Newspapers and members of Parliament are calling for an official investigation to prove or disprove Mr. Wright's extraordinary charges. "There can be no cover-up of treason," said David Steel, the leader of the Liberal Party, "and the secret services cannot be allowed to operate as a state within a state." But present indications are that Mrs. Thatcher will succeed in denying Parliament and the British people knowledge of whether the grave ac-

cusations made against MI5 are true.

So far as I can gather from talking with people here and from decoding veiled newspaper stories, MI5 began an investigation of Harold Wilson when he was out of power in 1970-71. According to the Independent, the investigation was "instigated" by the notorious James Angleton, then chief of the Central Intelligence Agency's counter-intelligence branch. The Observer says that Mr. Angleton had a KGB source codenamed "Oatslear" who identified Lord Wilson as a KGB agent. Mr. Angleton himself told the Sunday Times, "We were asked by your MI5 to supply information about Wilson." (Since Mr. Angleton sees KGB agents everywhere—he once floated the

Street and of the prime minister's room in the House of Commons and not at all to the wider questions raised by Mr. Wright's charges.

Subsequently she claimed that a recent internal investigation by the director general of MI5 has refuted Mr. Wright's accusations. Not everyone is impressed by the fact that MI5, an agency dedicated to deception, should boast of clearing itself.

Mrs. Thatcher further argues that she has no ministerial responsibility for events before her own government came to office and that therefore she cannot discuss them. Yet in the past she has not hesitated to hold forth to Parliament regarding espionage scandals taking place before her

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theory that I was a Soviet mole in the Kennedy White House—I have less than total faith in his common sense.)

MI5 noted that in the 1950s, as a representative of a firm of timber merchants, Lord Wilson had made 19 visits to the Soviet Union. A former MI5 officer, James Miller, told the Sunday Times that his case officer has assured him that Lord Wilson was a "Soviet agent." A group of MI5 zealots undertook—apparently on their own—to drive him from office.

Not many people here believe for a moment that Harold Wilson was a Soviet agent. Most consider it far more likely that MI5 had a lot of right-wing nuts who saw reds under every bed. Consequently, the anti-Wilson line has been modified. The present MI5 line is that Lord Wilson was OK and that the object was not to overthrow him but to protect him from close associates deemed sympathetic to the KGB. The claim is even made that Lord Wilson granted MI5 permission to launch a thorough investigation of his somewhat dubious circle.

All this naturally increases curiosity about what in the world MI5 was really doing back in 1974. But Mrs. Thatcher initially responded to all requests for an official inquiry by citing as sufficient an inquiry made by the Labor government in 1977 when James Callaghan was prime minister. In fact, the 1977 investigation was addressed to the narrow question of the alleged bugging of No. 10 Downing

government came to office, making statements about Anthony Blunt (1979), Roger Hollis (1981), and Maurice Oldfield (1987). Roy Jenkins, a Social Democratic leader, has asked her to repudiate "the extraordinary constitutional doctrine . . . that the activities of a permanent government agency, however monstrous they might be alleged to be, could not be inquired into once there was a change of government." Mrs. Thatcher, dodging the question as so often happens during question hour in the Commons, replied that she had nothing further to add to the replies she had already given on the subject.

Oddly enough, the Labor Party displays little zeal for an official inquiry. It could devote one of its regular opposition debates to the question, but Neil Kinnock, the Labor leader, has reportedly decided to leave MI5 to his backbenchers. Lord Wilson, though he raised the MI5 issue himself some years back, now rather pooh-poohs it from his vacation retreat in the Scilly Isles, and James Callaghan, now Sir James, required a long period of consideration before asking Mrs. Thatcher to reopen the matter.

One reason for this bipartisan diffidence is that both parties may feel threatened by an inquiry. The Conservative leadership may not want the world to know about the ties of some of its own members to MI5 and to the CIA. The Labor leadership may not want the world to know about its own occasional use of MI5 to combat commu-

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nist penetration of the Labor Party nor about some of Lord Wilson's more unsavory associates. A few MPs, notably Roy Jenkins and Merlyn Rees, both former home secretaries (the minister to whom MI5 very nominally reports), are pursuing the question but not getting very far.

What most surprises the visiting American is the absence of both parliamentary and public indignation. One can imagine the explosion in Washington if it were plausibly charged that an FBI or CIA group had set out to overthrow an American administration. On March 31, I noted in this space Mr. Rees's cry of frustration: "If it was the United States there would be a proper investigation. There would be hell to pay."

The British reaction is indeed different. It is partly, I am told, that the public does not get much excited any longer about shenanigans in the secret services. After all, as Peregrine Worsthorne writes in the conservative Sunday Telegraph, the "plotting was harebrained enough and never got anywhere; more low comedy than high tragedy"—so why take it seriously? Why stir things up, injure reputations, demoralize the secret services, shake the people's faith in their masters? Cover-ups are in the British tradition. "They help to prevent unnecessary picking-off of scabs that protect wounds, the re-infection of which could all too easily poison the body politic," Mr. Worsthorne says.

Separation of Powers

Americans would seem—from time to time, anyway—to have a more stringent sense of the accountability of government to Congress and to the people. Through a written constitution, a bill of rights and the separation of powers, accountability is built into our system as it is not built into the British system. Proponents of reform of the Constitution, like my esteemed friends of the Committee on the Constitution System, look askance at the separation of powers and with sentimental enthusiasm on the parliamentary system. I trust that the contrast between the American handling of the Iran-contra scandal and the British handling of the MI5 scandal will induce them to take another look.

As old Sam Ervin put it so splendidly a decade ago, "One of the great advantages of the three separate branches of government is that it's difficult to corrupt all three at the same time."

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